Protestant Reformation, Other Leaders

Calvin and the City of Geneva- Theocracy

John Calvin the French lawyer who became a minister and eventually began the "Calvinist movement" established a religious ruled City (Theocracy) in Geneva, Switzerland. Upon taking rule of the City he announced that the basis of all law would be the Bible, as interpreted by Protestant clergy, government thus became a form of theocracy. Calvin was dictator of Geneva for 23 years, until his death in 1564. In Geneva there were laws for everything, for example: "The whole household shall attend the sermons on Sunday." Those who arrived late were first warned, then fined.

Just as in Catholic territories, heresy was an insult to God and treason to the state. Heretics would not be tolerated. During Calvin's tenure, 76 persons were banished from Geneva, and 58 killed. One year, charges were brought against 14 witches who conspired with Satan to bring the plague to Geneva, the Council burned them all. There’s no record to show if this improved the plague.

Never before or since, has a city's virtue been so thoroughly enforced. Geneva was cleansed of drunkenness, dancing, immoral songs, excess entertainment, extravagance, and immodest dress. The law specified the color of clothing and the number of dishes at a meal. Theater was first limited to religious plays; then these too were banned. Calvinists often focused on the old Testament of the Bible, therefore many of their children were named for Bible characters. One father was commanded to name his son Abraham, he preferred the boy be named Claude, for this sin he spent four days in jail.

The Geneva press was completely censored by Calvin, who had his own index of forbidden books. And it was a crime to speak disrespectfully of Calvin. Failure to comply was treated with a specified sequence of punishments. First came reprimand, then fines, imprisonment, or banishment. Fornicators might be exiled or drowned. Adulterers, blasphemers and idolaters were killed. One child was beheaded for striking his parents. As was the general custom, confessions were obtained by torture.

Geneva was reportedly free of prostitution, of lewdness and even of rouge. There were no lawsuits. There were also no church bells and no organs. Actually, control may not have been that complete. There are records of illegitimate children, of abandoned infants, and forced marriages. Calvin's own stepdaughter and son-in-law were condemned for adultery.

Calvin's virtues did not include a sense of humor. But he approved bowling and other games, and enjoyed wine in moderation.

Ironically, one man declared heretic by both Catholics and Calvin was named Servetus. He offended both groups by opposing the baptism of infants. In his interpretation of the Chapter of the Old Testament of the Bible named Isaiah [7:14] he followed the original Hebrew rather than either the Greek or Latin translations. The notion that God had predestined some to burn forever in hell regardless of their guilt, he labeled blasphemy. Interpreting the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 13, Servetus taught that faith is good, but love is better. He accurately described Judea (modern day Israel) as a barren country; this was deemed heresy, because the Bible described Judea as a land flowing with milk and honey.

Servetus was right about some things. Unfortunately he also quarreled with everybody. He believed he was appointed to lead a holy war against both the Pope and Calvin. A Catholic court condemned him to death by a slow fire. Unenthusiastic about this prospect, Servetus escaped, and wandered about France for three months. He stayed one month in Geneva, and was about to leave for Zurich. Then while attending church, he was recognized and arrested. During his imprisonment he and Calvin exchanged a number of insulting letters. Servetus identified Calvin as a "liar, impostor, hypocrite, and miserable wretch." For his part, Calvin concluded that Servetus was a "perfidious scamp" and a "dirty dog."

But it was Calvin who held the full power of the State and Servetus fate was sealed. Servetus made one last request: that he not be burned, rather beheaded. But Calvin saw no light in this. The next morning Servetus was burned.